

James Robert Williams

Amber South
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Known for his wealth, power, leadership, and his home, James Robert Williams influenced his community and nation. The castle-like home he built in Carmi, Illinois, is still a residence today.

Born on December 27, 1851, in Burnt Prairie, Illinois, James Robert Williams was the son of Thomas and Susan Rawls Williams. As a child, he attended several schools in the area. Williams graduated in the classical course from the University of Indiana in Bloomington on July 7, 1875. During his time at the university, he began to take an interest in law. As a result, he attended the Union College of Law in Chicago, Illinois. On June 10, 1876, he completed his law course and was admitted to the bar the following month. He opened a law office in Carmi, Illinois, on August 1, 1876, in the Schumacher building on Main Street.

Williams was Master of Chancery from 1880-1882. In April 1882 he was nominated for county judge by the Democratic convention. He was elected on November 7 by a majority of 1,295 votes, and served a four-year term.

After his term as county judge, he resumed his law practice. He continued to take an interest in politics, and as a result, the Democrats nominated him for Congress. Williams served several terms in the United States House of Representatives. He was elected to the Fifty-First Congress in 1889 to fill the vacancy resulting from Richard W. Townsend's

death. His character and propensity for service as a Congressman resulted in his re-election, and he served a total of fourteen years from the White County district.

In 1900 his name was presented to the National Convention at St. Louis, Missouri, as a candidate for vice-president. In 1902, the *Chicago Chronicle* said he was being groomed for president. "Bob Williams for President" headlined the *Chicago Evening Post* on November 9, 1903. In 1903, Illinois Democrats nominated Williams for the United States Senate. He did not win but received a letter from Williams Jennings Bryan, who expressed an interest in talking with him about plans for 1904. Because of his friendship with Williams, Bryan made a whistle-stop visit to Carmi in 1896 to give a presidential campaign speech.

Despite his occupation with politics, Williams was also a family man. On November 26, 1884, he married Miss Minnie (Mary) Shannon. Mary's grandfather was a doctor and her father was a lawyer. His marriage to Mary gave Williams resources that equaled his political power. Therefore, he purchased several thousand acres of land in White County, Illinois, including the entire section of land across from the courthouse, which is where he built his house. In 1896, he hired David Getaz of Knoxville, Tennessee, to build his home. When interviewing Cindy Conley, genealogist and Carmi historian, she commented that Williams built his house in this particular spot as a way of showing his power and wealth.

George F. Barber designed the home of Williams. Barber was born in DeKalb, Illinois, in 1854. In the 1800s he established a mail-order architectural business in DeKalb, but later moved his business to Knoxville, Tennessee. By 1900 his business, George F. Barber and Company, had become one of the most successful mail-order

businesses, selling over 20,000 sets of plans before ending his mail-order portion in 1908. Today at least 200 of his homes have been identified and remain intact. Williams's three-story home with three turreted towers mimics that of a miniature castle, and is the only home known for its design of Romanesque, Queen Anne, and exotic styling. It is also the only brick home by Barber in southern Illinois. The cost to build Williams's home was \$9,000, which was considered a lot of money at that time.

The Williams's had two sons, Thomas Shannon Williams and Robert Ready Williams. Thomas was mentally ill and spent most of his life in institutions. The youngest son, Robert, married Claire Arnat in 1928. Their son, James Robert Williams, was born in 1933.

When Williams retired in 1905, he and Mary moved to Loma Linda, California, to be closer to their family. On November 8, 1923, Williams died at a sanitarium at Loma Linda. He was brought back to Carmi, and funeral services were held at his home. He was buried at Maple Ridge Cemetery in Carmi. Soon after, Mary and Robert Ready Williams died. The home of Williams was left in the hands of his daughter-in-law, Claire.

Claire moved into the house in 1955. She lived there until the late 1960s and decided to sell the house because of the damage by an earthquake in 1968 and a tornado in 1969. In 1985, Claire sold the house to the city of Carmi for \$ 165,000. The city of Carmi had plans to raze the house to make room for a new public library. Before razing the home, the city held a tour of the house, and Claire had pamphlets made to memorialize Williams and his home. During the tour, many people were amazed with how well the house looked and were convinced of the house's significance. As a result, the "Save the Castle"

committee was formed. After hard work, the Williams's house was put on the National Register of Historic Places on January 29, 1987.

On August 15, 1988, the city sold the "castle" for \$75,000 to Mitchell Bailey, taking a loss of \$90,000. Mitchell was from Chicago and was a former resident of Edwards County, Illinois. Mitchell had inherited money and began restoring the house. However, he ran out of money and the bank was left with the house. In the summer of 1993, the bank sold the home to John and Louise Malnik of Virginia. In an interview with Louise in July 2002, she said they have made some changes to the house. They added a sunroom and deck, finished half of the third floor, and turned the office into a kitchen. She loves living in the house that once belonged to James Robert Williams. [From Barry Cleveland, "Castle Sold to Chicago Man," *The Carmi Times*, (Aug. 16, 1988); student historian's interview with Cindy Conley, (July 8, 2002); "History of Williams Told at Meeting," *White County Historian*, (June 5, 1960); Jari Jackson, "350 Residents Rally in Bid to Save Castle," *The Evansville Courier*, (Aug. 13, 1988); student historian's interview with Louis Malnik, (July 28, 2002); "101 Year Old Mansion was Home To Prominent Family," *The Carmi Times*, (Nov. 5, 1997); "Our 'Bob' Died in California," *The Carmi Times*, (Nov. 15, 1923); Michael A. Tomlan, "George F. Barbors Cottage Souvenir Number Two," *American Life* (1982).]